

“Paul to Timothy” (1 Timothy 1:1–2)

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Does anyone here receive letters anymore? It seems like most of our correspondence is done through emails, texts, and phone calls. When we go to check our mail, we usually don't expect letters. We're prepared to deal with junk mail, advertisements, bills, and perhaps a package. But occasionally we'll still receive an important letter in the mail.

Last Tuesday was Tax Day, and whether you had filed your taxes in February or at the last minute, you know it's an important thing to do. And whether you owed the IRS money or received a refund, you hope not to hear back from them. But sometimes we do receive a letter from the IRS, and that will surely get your attention. Last year, I received a letter from the IRS in May which said I owed money. I had received a small refund in April, but my tax preparer neglected to include a form that dealt with the tax credit I received to help pay for health care. I had received too large of an advanced credit and had to pay back the difference to the government. You can be sure that letter got my attention.

Now, that's a letter concerning tax obligations to the government. That's an important thing. We usually pay attention to issues regarding money and possibly getting into trouble with the government. But what if we received an even more important letter?

What if we received a letter from God, telling us how “to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15)?¹ Shouldn't we pay more attention to that letter? If we are God's people, shouldn't we want to know how to behave in his house, the church? Shouldn't we want to know how God expects his church to operate?

I think the answers to those questions should be, “Yes.” And today we're going to start to look at such a letter, the book of 1 Timothy.

Today is going to be an introduction to the book. Since we're going to spend about four months in this book and some related passages in the New Testament, I thought it would be good to help us understand its background. Today may feel more like a lecture than a sermon, though I

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

hope what I say today will inspire us to worship God and to be confident that what we read in the Bible is truly God's word.

There are three things that I want to address today. First, I want us to know who wrote this letter. Second, I want us to know to whom the letter was written. And then, third, I want us to get a glimpse of what this letter is about.

So, without further ado, let's start by reading the first two verses of this book. Here is 1 Timothy 1:1–2:

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope,

² To Timothy, my true child in the faith:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

These verses clearly state that the letter is from the apostle Paul. So, let's discuss who Paul was.

A lot of us know something about Paul, but I don't want to take that knowledge for granted. So, here's a quick background. Paul was a Jewish man, born sometime around or shortly after Jesus was born. He was born in the city of Tarsus (Acts 9:11; 21:39; 22:3), one of the more significant cities in the Roman Empire and now part of Turkey. He had two names, one Hebrew and the other Latin, so he is sometimes referred to as Saul, and then mostly later as Paul. (His name didn't change at the time of his conversion.) He was educated in Jerusalem under a rabbi named Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Later, he became a Pharisee (Acts 23:6; 26:5; Phil. 3:5), one of the prominent sects of Judaism. Pharisees weren't the official religious leaders—those were the priests—but they were lay leaders who were experts in the Torah, the law of the Old Testament.

That was Paul's position at the time when Jesus died and then rose from the grave. And as the Christian movement started to spread in Jerusalem, a man named Stephen was killed. The Jewish people thought that he was blaspheming, speaking against the temple, so they killed him. He was the first Christian martyr. And when that happened, we read this in Acts: "Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul" (Acts 7:58). When Stephen died, we read, "And Saul approved of his execution" (Acts 8:1).

After Stephen's death, Saul persecuted other Christians, arresting them and bringing them to prison (Acts 8:3). Paul apparently approved of the deaths of other Christians, casting a vote against them (Acts 26:10–11).

Saul was so against Christianity, surely thinking that this new religious movement was blasphemous, that he even traveled from Jerusalem to Damascus to try to round up Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem, where they would surely die. We read this in Acts 9:1–5:

¹ But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” ⁵ And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

From that time on, Paul’s life was changed. He would then become the greatest of Jesus’ special messengers, his apostles. He traveled throughout the Roman Empire, going to major cities to declare that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the long-awaited King that God promised would come. He declared that Jesus is Lord, the one who lived a perfect life and died on the cross in place of sinners and then rose from the grave.

Paul went from being a zealous persecutor of the church to a zealous church planter. He was so convinced that his message was true that he endured great hardships, including beatings and imprisonments. And he would later die in Rome. The church historian Eusebius says that Paul was beheaded in Rome during the reign of Emperor Nero, who died in the year 68. It is even claimed that Paul and Peter died on the same day.² Paul probably wrote 1 Timothy a few years before his death, but after he was released from his first imprisonment in Rome, which is described in the book of Acts.

So, that is a brief biography of Paul, the man to whom thirteen letters in the New Testament are credited.

But some people don’t believe that Paul wrote all those letters, including 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. Now, I want you to know this not because I believe it. I believe that Paul wrote the letters that bear his name. But it’s common to hear doubts about Paul’s authorship in some prominent places. When you hear a story about the Bible on NPR or read about it in *Time* magazine, it’s often a story that casts doubt on the truth and authority of the Bible. If you go into a secular bookstore and make your way to the religion section, you might see books by a scholar

² Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.25.

named Bart Ehrman, who wrote a book called *Forged*.³ Ehrman claims that many of the books in the New Testament were not written by the people we think they were written by.

Now, this is quite a serious claim. Think about what would happen if you got a letter from the IRS claiming that you owed them money. You would want to know if the IRS actually wrote and mailed you that letter, wouldn't you? Otherwise, it would be a scam. If the books of the Bible were not written by apostles or people who had access to eyewitness testimony, then how could we trust that what they said was true? How could we believe that such letters were God's word?

Well, Ehrman doesn't believe the Bible is from God. His whole project is to get people to doubt the claims of Christianity.

But there are some people who are Christians who believe that such books of the Bible like 2 Thessalonians, the so-called "Pastoral Letters" (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), and 2 Peter weren't written by Paul and Peter. Sometimes other books (Ephesians, Colossians, and 1 Peter) are often on that list. These Christian scholars believe that there was a known practice at the time of some people writing in the name of others. They say that students of a more famous person wrote in the name of their deceased teacher. They say that as long as the content was generally the thoughts of the one whose name is used, and if people understood this practice of writing in another's name, then it wasn't deceptive.

What are we to make of these claims? Can we trust that this letter of 1 Timothy was actually written by Paul?

Well, when we hear claims like this, we have to think about evidence. Whenever you hear a claim made about the Bible, such as that it contains contradictions or false statements, you have to ask for the evidence behind these claims. So, what is the evidence that Paul did or didn't write this letter?

There are two types of evidence that scholars consider. One is called external evidence. That's the kind of evidence that is outside the actual text of the book. External evidence concerns things like what the earliest writers outside the Bible said about this book. It also deals with what kind of manuscript evidence we have.

³ Bart Ehrman, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2011).

The fact is that we don't have the original copies of any ancient documents. We don't have video of people writing them. So, we lack the kind of "proof" that many modern people would like to have. But that doesn't mean we have no evidence. We have copies of the original text and we have the writings of early Christian theologians who make references to the books of the Bible.

As far as 1 Timothy goes, we don't have anyone in church history doubting that Paul wrote this book until the nineteenth century. Think about that. For almost eighteen hundred years, everyone assumed that Paul wrote this letter. For someone to change their mind about this issue and fly in the face of eighteen hundred years of church history, there should be some pretty strong evidence that Paul didn't write this book. But there's no evidence that anyone else wrote this letter, no early document that claims something like, "There's this letter going around addressed to Timothy, but we all know Paul didn't write it." As early as the beginning of the second century, we have Christians quoting from 1 Timothy. Polycarp (69–155) wrote his own *Letter to the Philippians* at the beginning of the second century. And in one section he seems to quote from 1 Timothy and Ephesians:

"But the love of money is the root of all evils."¹ Knowing, therefore, that "as we brought nothing into the world, so we can carry nothing out,"² let us arm ourselves with the armour of righteousness;³ and let us teach, first of all, ourselves to walk in the commandments of the Lord.⁴

So, all the external evidence seems to point to the fact that Paul wrote this letter.

The other type of evidence that scholars consider is internal evidence. This refers to the actual text of the document. Some scholars notice that 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus use different vocabulary than Paul's other letters. In addition to different words, there are differences in grammar, syntax, and ways of making an argument (rhetoric). So, these scholars can't believe that one man would right, say, Galatians, 1 Corinthians, and Romans, and also 1 Timothy.

But there may be good reasons why Paul used a different writing style in the Pastoral Letters. One reason may be that he was addressing different concerns. The issues he was dealing

¹ 1 Tim. 6:10.

² 1 Tim. 6:7.

³ Eph. 6:11.

⁴ Polycarp of Smyrna, "The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians" 4, in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 34.

with in 1 Timothy were different than the issues in Galatians. Also, Paul was writing to a specific individual (though in a public way, as we'll see), not to a whole church. Additionally, Paul's vocabulary might have been affected by learning the Latin language. "Paul could have learned Latin during his first imprisonment in Rome in order to extend his ministry westward" to Spain.⁵ Finally, Paul might have used a different secretary to write the letter.

It was common for writers to use an amanuensis, or a secretary. If I asked you who wrote the book of Romans, you would probably say Paul. And you're not wrong (Rom. 1:1–7). But take a look at Romans 16:22: "I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord." Tertius was the man who actually put pen to paper (or stylus to papyrus, technically).⁶ Paul probably dictated the content of the letter. It was possible for secretaries to have some input into the actual wording of the letter. This still happens today. Letters from various authorities are often written by their assistants. The content of the letter and the final format of the letter are approved by their bosses, but the one doing the writing was someone else. That might have been the case in Paul's last letters, though no person is specifically mentioned. Some think Luke might have been the actual writer of the letters, while Paul was the author, the one dictating the basic content.

At any rate, the point is that there is no good reason to believe the author is anyone but Paul. If it wasn't Paul, it was someone trying to deceive. Paul says that Timothy is his "true child in the faith." Paul wasn't Timothy's biological or even adoptive father, but his spiritual mentor. And if someone other than Paul were writing this, it would be false.

A scholar named Lewis Donelson wrote a book on the issue of falsely attributed letters in ancient Greece and Rome. I don't think he's a Christian and he believed that there are pseudonymous letters in the New Testament. But he said this, "No one ever seems to have accepted a document as religiously and philosophically prescriptive which was known to be forged. I do not know a single example."⁷ He later adds, "We are forced to admit that in Christian circles pseudonymity was considered a dishonorable device and, if discovered, the document was rejected and the author, if known, was excoriated."⁸

⁵ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, vol. 46, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2000), c.

⁶ This is also why, at the end of some of his letters, Paul personally writes a greeting, to verify that the letter is actually his. See 1 Cor. 16:21; Gal. 6:11.

⁷ Lewis R. Donelson, *Pseudepigraphy and Ethical Argument in the Pastoral Epistles*, *Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie* 22 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1986), 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

So, if this letter wasn't written by Paul, it's a forgery, and it should be rejected. But since we don't have good reasons to believe anyone other than Paul wrote it, we should go along with the vast majority of Christians and accept that it comes from the apostle himself.

And I take time to say all of this because we should be confident that the Bible is the word of God. It's not something that some deceptive or misguided people concocted. It's not a fabrication or a forgery. Yet we often hear that the Bible wasn't written by the people who allegedly wrote it, or that it's full of errors or contradictions. Don't buy into those claims. Ask people who make those claims, "What is the evidence? Can you prove that to me?"

The letter was written by Paul to Timothy. And that brings us to the second issue, the letter's initial audience. Who was Timothy? Timothy was Paul's younger associate. We first meet Timothy in the Bible in Acts 16. He had a Gentile father and a Jewish-Christian mother. In Acts, we're told that Timothy was already a disciple, a Christian, when Paul took him on his second missionary journey. It's likely that he became a Christian because of Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 14). From the time of his second missionary journey onward, Timothy was either with Paul or represented Paul in places where Paul couldn't be. Paul said of Timothy, "I have no one like him" (Phil. 2:20). In fact, six of Paul's letters are said to be from Timothy as well as Paul, though they are obviously authored by Paul (see 2 Cor. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; Philem. 1).

So, Timothy was Paul's coworker. We might say he was an apostolic delegate. And at this time, he was in the city of Ephesus, where Paul had preached years earlier. Paul had spent about two-and-a-half years in that city (Acts 19), and even after he left, he met with the elders of the church in Ephesus (Acts 20). Paul obviously had a lot invested in that city. It was a significant one in that part of the Roman Empire, in a province called Asia Minor, in the western part of what is now known as Turkey.

Timothy had the responsibility of making sure the church in Ephesus was in good order. But Paul didn't write to Timothy only. At the very end of the letter, Paul writes, "Grace be with you" (1 Tim. 6:21). In the original Greek language, the "you" is in the plural. We might say "you all" in English. So, the letter isn't written to just Timothy. It is written for the whole of the church in Ephesus. The whole church should know what Paul has written.

And that brings us to the final issue we'll look at today. What is this letter about? Let's look at 1 Timothy 3:14–16:

¹⁴ I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, ¹⁵ if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. ¹⁶ Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.

First, notice that Paul gives the reason why he is writing. He hopes to visit Timothy in Ephesus soon, but he's writing this letter so that if he can't get there soon, Timothy will know how people ought to behave in the household of God. The church is the living God's home. It is a pillar and buttress of truth. If we care about God and about the truth, we're going to pay careful attention to how the church should operate, and how we should behave in God's house. (God's house isn't this building, it's a people!) That's why studying this letter is so important.

Second, notice that Paul presents a short confession of faith. This is probably some kind of statement—whether it was a hymn or a creed—about Jesus that Paul was quoting. Jesus is the God who took on flesh, he is the God-man. His identity and his ministry were vindicated by the Holy Spirit, particularly when he rose from the grave after dying on the cross. Paul doesn't give us a clear message of Jesus' death here, but the reason why Jesus died was not because of his sin. He didn't have any. He was the only perfect person, the only one who ever walked this earth and lived a perfect life. Yet he was treated like a criminal, dying on an instrument of torture and death, so that the penalty for our sin could be paid.

Yet Jesus was vindicated by his resurrection. He had been sealed in a tomb on the first day, the day of his death. But on the third day, he rose from the grave in a body that is immortal and indestructible. His resurrected body is the first installment of something that will come later, the new creation. This old creation has been tainted by sin, our rebellion against God. Everything that we think is wrong with this world, whether fighting between people, natural disasters, our own feelings of depression and anxiety, and even death itself, can be traced back to sin. Worst of all, our sense of being distant from God is the result of human rebellion against him. Jesus' perfect life and his sacrifice on the cross remove that distance for all who trust in him. We can truly be reconciled to God. Yet we still live a hard life in the old creation. But when Jesus returns

to Earth, he will renew it. It will be a day of judgment for those who reject Jesus, but it will be a day of glory for those who trust in him. The best part of Jesus' return is the resurrection of his people. We who believe in Jesus will have resurrected bodies. And the universe will have its own resurrection. There will be no more famine and flooding, no more weeping and sadness, and no more death.

This confession of faith also says that Jesus was seen by angels, presumably after his resurrection. And he was seen by many human witnesses, too. They proclaimed Jesus throughout the Roman Empire. Paul had a large role to play in that mission. Many Jews and Gentiles came to believe in Jesus. And Jesus was taken up into glory. He ascended to heaven, where he is right now with God the Father. He serves as the high priest of his people, pleading his sacrifice on their behalf, so that their sins are covered. He intercedes for us, praying for us, just as the Holy Spirit intercedes for those who don't know how to pray.

This is the core of the Christian faith. That is why Paul says in the very first verse of this letter that Jesus is "our hope."

Part of the reason why Paul wrote this letter to Timothy is because there were false teachers in Ephesus, people who were teaching something contrary to the message that Paul taught. From the beginning, there were false teachers who invaded churches, just as there are false teachers today who pervert and corrupt the message of Christianity. Part of Paul's concerns in this letter is to make sure that sound doctrine is taught. As we go through this letter, we'll see that.

I suppose that is why Paul begins this letter by stating that he is "an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus." An apostle is a special envoy or messenger. The apostles were the ones who were commissioned by Jesus to be his messengers, the ones who saw Jesus in the flesh, particularly after his resurrection. These false teachers weren't apostles, certainly not by the command of God the Father and Christ Jesus, God the Son.

And Paul mentions that Timothy is his "true child in the faith." The false teachers were not brought up in the faith the way that Timothy was. Timothy was Paul's true spiritual heir, his true representative. Not everyone who claims to speak for God is God's messenger or mouthpiece. But Paul was, and so was Timothy.

Finally, this letter is also about the grace, mercy, and peace that come from God. Notice that these things come from both "God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord." This shows that

Jesus is God. The very word “Lord” indicates that, but the fact that God the Father and Jesus are both the givers of grace, mercy, and peace indicates that they act as one.

The word “grace” refers to the fact that salvation is a gift from God. We are not in the right with God because we are good people, because we’ve earned his favor, or because we’ve followed all the rules. Christianity teaches that it is impossible for us to earn something from God and that it’s impossible for us to be perfect, which is what God’s perfect standards require. But God is generous. He gives us what we don’t deserve. God doesn’t forget our sin, though. He doesn’t just shrug it off or sweep it under the rug. No, God is a perfect judge, and judges don’t ignore the evidence in front of them. But God sent his Son, who came willingly to take on the punishment that our crimes deserve. All of this is a gift.

The word “mercy” can refer to acts of pity. If grace is a gift, something we don’t deserve, mercy is not giving us over to what we do deserve. But the Greek word translated as “mercy” was used to translate a Hebrew word in the Old Testament that is often translated as “steadfast love” in English.⁹ The idea is that God is faithful to the covenant he has made with his people, and his love for his people endures even in spite of their sin.

And the word “peace” doesn’t refer to a feeling, but an objective reality. We can be at peace with God because of the work of Jesus on our behalf. This implies that before coming to Jesus, we’re at war with God. We start out life as God’s enemies, ignoring the King of the Universe, and even rebelling against him, acting as though we are little kings and queens. But once we come to Jesus, that war against God is over. We submit to his loving rule, and he does not treat us according to our rebellion.

Even in these three words, we get a sense of the core of Christianity. Yet Christianity doesn’t do away with all rules. God has designed our lives. He is, after all, the Creator of everything, including the church. He knows best how the church should operate. In order to be a church that accurately reflects the God of order, we need to conduct the church according to God’s rules.

To be the church of Christ, we must maintain this confession of faith. We must hang on to the truth that God has revealed to us.

⁹ The Greek word is *ἔλεος* (*eleos*) and the Hebrew word is *חסד* (*hesed*).

In order to be a church of grace and mercy, we must know the gospel and act according to it.

That's why this letter matters so much.

If you don't know what Christianity is about, I invite you to come back. The rest of the sermons in this series won't be like this one. But we're going through this letter because it's important for the church. And you really can't separate a right relationship with God from a right relationship with a local church. If you want to know more about Jesus and the Bible, I would love to talk to you personally.

For the rest of us, there will be plenty for us to consider, for as we move through 1 Timothy, we'll find that all of us will be challenged. God's word has a way of doing that. But it leads us to truth, and when we follow God's instructions, we find that his commands are not burdensome. Instead, we find grace, mercy, and peace in the household of the living God.